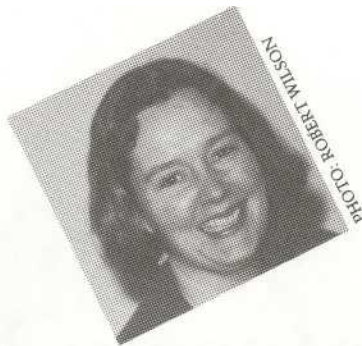


Shakespeare in Canada

Lois Burdett and Helen Edmonds teach grades 2 and 3 in Stratford, Ontario. The curriculum requires that students in those grades be introduced to their community. Burdett and Edmonds realized that in Stratford where a festival of Shakespearean plays is mounted annually, where streets are named after characters in those plays, where the schools where they teach are called "Hamlet" and "Avon," an introduction to the community is necessarily an introduction to Shakespeare. Accordingly, the teachers asked their students to research the life and times of Shakespeare. So surprised were they at the children's interest in the playwright and his work that they decided to expand the unit. Their account of this project, "Shakespeare and the grade 2 and 3 student," appeared in the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario Newsletter (April / May 1987).

The expansion of the project began when the two teachers told the kids the story of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Not surprisingly, the children were enthralled by this tale of young lovers stumbling through the forest, fairies who have a malevolent edge, a splashy wedding which culminates with the performance by the mechanicals. The teachers channelled the children's enthusiasm, suggesting that they improvise the story. As well, they encouraged them to listen to tapes of a professional production of the play. Soon the rhythms and diction of that production were creeping into the improvisational work of the children who, by this point, had decided to write their own adaptation, in verse, of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The story doesn't end there: the kids performed their play on the Festival stage for the Festival company and, if that weren't triumph enough, they were invited to perform in Texas at the 150th anniversary of the state.

The story of this class project, a story which is extraordinary because of its very ordinariness (this, after all, is a class project in a school in a small Ontario city), is a moving celebration of the capacity of children to learn and discover. It shatters the pervasive sense that Shakespeare is difficult, suitable only for an elite who are sophisticated enough to appreciate the complexities of textual nuance. If Tracy's confession is any indication, the project gave the children enormous pleasure. She said, "I act out William's play when



I'm supposed to be sleeping. I use my dolls. My Mom doesn't hear me."

The problem of textual pleasure is always one which is always raised by productions of Shakespeare which, all too frequently, seem designed as monuments to the greatness of the playwright. Yet reverence manifests itself as staid and dull productions which are devoid of any sense of life. Most of the articles in this issue, in one way or another, address attempts by theatres across Canada to rescue Shakespeare's works from the deadliness of this sort of lifeless reverence. Sometimes the rescue attempts have involved innovative staging; on other occasions, innovation extends (as it did with the grades 2 and 3) to alterations to the script which are sometimes so radical that only a trace of Shakespeare's work is evident in the revision.

Critics are prone to spend time pondering the relative merits of these sorts of productions: are they legitimate? do they do justice to Shakespeare? Sometimes we can analyze ourselves out of anything but the most highly intellectualized response, which was why I was touched and amused by the remark of Christian, one of the kids involved in the Stratford project. He said, "If Shakespeare were alive today, I would invite him to sleep over in my tree-fort and we would talk a lot about his plays." It is hard not to envy the intimacy of his response to Shakespeare's plays.

—A. W.

This issue of *CTR* introduces a new masthead: after five years as editor, Robert Wallace has chosen to step aside to devote more time to his own critical work. But the many readers and contributors who have benefited from Bob's herculean labours and editorial wisdom over the past seventeen issues will be happy to learn that he isn't stepping far. He will stay on board as part of a four-person editorial team consisting of Alan Filewod as editor (who will be responsible for the overall management of the editorial office), and Natalie Rewa, Robert Wallace and Ann Wilson as associate editors.

Each member of this team will produce one issue a year. It is our hope that this division of responsibility will bring new perspectives and interests to *CTR*, while continuing our commitment to record the best of Canadian theatre with first rate criticism, provocative reportage and exciting new playtexts.

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